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Rivalry Threatening to Split Contras

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MIAMI, May 15 — After three days of talks, Nicaraguan rebel leaders remain so deeply divided on how to restructure their guerrilla movement that one key leader is ready to resign, according to several rebel officials here.

The State Department is sufficiently alarmed by the internal dispute that it has threatened hard-liners within the rebel movement that if they do not make concessions, aid to the guerrillas will be cut off within a few weeks, according to four rebel and Congressional sources.

When asked to comment, a State Department official would confirm only that Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams told rebel leaders that "it is necessary to resolve internal differences or else aid will be threatened." Several rebel officials here say that a solution can be forced only by more pressure from the Administration.

A Threat to Cut Off Aid

The furious showdown between competing rebel leaders appears to be the inevitable culmination of Administration efforts to transform the politically conservative guerrilla army, which enjoys little or no international standing, into a popular movement capable of threatening the Sandinista leadership in Nicaragua.

The outcome has major implications because several members of Congress have said they will not vote for further American assistance to the rebels if they do not form a broad-based movement.

In the struggle for power, rebel officials who were originally selected by the Central Intelligence Agency to head the Honduras-based guerrilla army known as the Nicaraguan Democratic Force face less militant rebel officials who, with the leader of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, are co-leaders of the new American-backed umbrella group known as the United Nicaraguan Opposition.

'He's Had It'

According to several well-placed rebel and Congressional sources, Arturo Cruz, who is seen as the least hard-line of the rebel leaders, has said he will resign if the old rebel military structure is not brought fully under the authority of the United Nicaraguan Opposition. Rebel military leaders have fiercely resisted such a change.

"He's had it," said a rebel official who knows Mr. Cruz well. "If he doesn't get agreements on making the military side subservient to the civilian leaders, he's going to resign."

Mr. Cruz refused to comment on his intentions. If he resigns, several rebel sources here say, another top rebel official, Alfonso Robelo, will also probably resign. That would leave Adolfo Calero, head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, as the sole remaining rebel leader, an outcome that appears likely to torpedo further aid from Congress.

"If Cruz walks, they might as well kiss support to the rebels goodbye," said Representative Dave McCurdy, an Oklahoma Democrat who is seen as the leader of swing votes in the House on the issue of aid to the rebels. "It would clearly be a sign that the rebels refuse to become more democratic and provide a reasonable alternative to the Sandinistas."

Around-the-Clock Talks

In a shifting series of meetings in hotels, high-rise apartment towers that overlook the bay, and secluded homes on Key Biscayne, rebel leaders are locked in around-the-clock talks with their lieutenants and their internal opponents. C.I.A. agents flit at the edges to monitor the discussions, according to rebel sources, and President Reagan's special envoy, Philip C. Habib, flew down to speak to rebel leaders on Wednesday.

Eleven months ago, in the second major reorganization of the rebel movement in three years, the State Department and C.I.A. persuaded Mr. Cruz, Mr. Calero and Mr. Robelo to join together to lead the United Nicaraguan Opposition. But Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo have charged that the organization has remained politically powerless because Mr. Calero has maintained control of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force army and a separate bureaucracy that serves it.

Resistance Expected to Continue

Mr. Cruz is now demanding that the United Nicaraguan Opposition be the only political organization to represent the rebels, according to rebel sources, and that all decisions be taken by a majority vote of the top three leaders. That would allow him and Mr. Robelo to outvote Mr. Calero.

Mr. Calero has resisted both measures, the same rebel sources say, and is expected to continue resisting them in talks that could extend into next week.

Despite repeated telephone calls this afternoon, Mr. Calero could not be reached for comment.

In a number of confrontations over the last few months, Mr. Calero has refused to make any concession to Mr. Cruz, according to rebel and Congressional sources. He has maintained overall control of the war in Nicaragua, has sidestepped efforts to close his group's office in Washington in order to allow the United Nicaraguan Opposition to open an office, and has used private funds to carry out his own political activities, the sources say.

This week, according to two rebel sources, Mr. Calero suggested that members of the old Liberal Party, which served the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, be included in the new rebel organization. Mr. Calero was said to have argued that this would be a move at greater representation. Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo reportedly took the move as an attempt to increase the standing of conservatives in the organization.

Conduct in Interview Questioned

In a sign of the tensions between the top leaders, Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo demanded that the senior rebel military commander, Col. Enrique Bermúdez, explain a recent television interview in which he dismissed the importance of a new code of conduct written by the United Nicaraguan Opposition for rebel soldiers, rebel sources here say.

Mr. Bermúdez tried to avoid explaining his conduct during a brief meeting on Monday, saying he was very busy and had to return to Honduras, the rebel sources say. He then reportedly attempted to dismiss the matter in a manner that Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo found unconvincing.

Mr. Bermúdez, a close ally of Mr. Calero, is reported to be angry that Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo managed to persuade a group of rebel commanders in southern Nicaragua to join forces with them last week. In effect, this gave Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo, for the first time, their own base of military support. Mr. Bermúdez had hoped the southern rebel commanders would join the Honduran-based army that he commands, rebel officials here say.

At present, only three outcomes of the rebel leaders' dispute appear likely. They are that Mr. Calero would give in to Mr. Cruz; Mr. Cruz would modify his position and remain, or Mr. Cruz would carry out his threat and resign.